

‘ULAMĀ’ AND POWER: THE CASE OF AL-MANĪNĪ FAMILY IN LATE-OTTOMAN DAMASCUS

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With regard to the topic proposed for this 27th UEAI Congress, I shall deal with the relationship between two relevant fields of Islamic world, knowledge and power, otherwise said, between ‘*ulamā*’ and political authority, through the peculiar dynamics which tended to characterize the relationship between some renowned representatives of the former and the institutional as well as social sphere in late-Ottoman Damascus.¹ In particular, I shall focus on the analysis of data concerning members of an important branch of ‘*ulamā*’ who lived in Damascus between the mid-19th and the early 20th century: the al-Manīnī family.

Most sources which I shall refer to in this paper have been consulted at the *Markaz al-wathā’iq al-ta’rikhiyya* (Center for Historical Documentation) of Damascus.² These mainly consist of 1) biographical works (*tarājim*) related to the above-mentioned period, 2) texts of *faḍā’il*, marking virtues and/or qualities of important Damascene notables and even places that, like the biographies, belong to a specific historical and also literary tradition, 3) articles of the *majalla* (review) edited by the *Majma’ al-‘ilmī al-‘arabī* (Arab Scientific Academy) of Damascus, and 4) the *awāmir sulṭāniyya* (sultanal decrees), which offer important biographical data concerning ‘*ulamā*’ who were born, or had been living (*istawṭana*) in Damascus, there operating as *mudarrisūn* or *muḥaddithūn*, *quḍāt* (judges) or *khuṭabā*’ (preachers).

¹ With regard to Damascene ‘*ulamā*’ and their families between the late 19th and the early 20th century, it may be interesting to refer to some particular Arabic historical and literary production, such as the *tarājim* (biographies), which have still not been sufficiently taken into account. In particular, I would like to point out *Ḥilyat al-bashar fī ta’rikh al-qarn al-thālith ‘aṣar* of the Shaykh ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Bayṭār, and the more recent *A’yān Dimashq fī l-qarn al-thālith ‘aṣar wa niṣf al-qarn al-rābi’ ‘aṣar* of the Ḥanbali Shaykh Muḥammad Jamīl al-Shaṭṭī, which have proved to be essential in my research.

² The *Markaz al-wathā’iq al-ta’rikhiyya* of Damascus, founded in 1960 in the central quarter of Sūq Sārūjā, is a landmark for the study of *Bilād al-Shām* in the Ottoman period.

The special importance accorded to the group of ‘*ulamā*’ as interpreters of the Quran and as transmitters of the prophetic tradition (*ḥadīth*) through the history of the Arab-Islamic world is already given. Although several aspects concerning their relationship with the institutional sphere, as in the case of the *madāris*, remain fundamentally unchanged as far as their traditional role as *mudarrisūn* (teachers) or even *mutaṣarrifūn* (administrators) is concerned, I shall offer here some examples of how this relationship gradually tended to change in the late-Ottoman period, due to different reasons.

I do not need to emphasize the importance of Damascus as a religious, administrative as well as cultural center in the context of the Ottoman empire, in consideration of its role as main gathering point – together with Cairo – in the pilgrimage route to Mecca, and as capital of the Ottoman *wilāya* (province) of Syria.

The wide process of reform which is largely known under the name of *Tanzīmāt*, carried in the name of ideologies like Ottomanism and Modernism – these converging in the struggle to save the Empire from an unavoidable collapse – considerably affected the group of ‘*ulamā*’. The reform of the educational system, which the Ottoman government had been neglecting up to that point, soon became a central feature in the process of forming a new ruling class, both military and administrative. However, the remarkable effort that the Ottoman government put in the foundation of new schools (the more recent *makātib*) soon made a display of the weak importance – when not a complete lack of concern – accorded to ‘*ulamā*’ and to traditional institutions such as the *madāris*, of which they were mainly responsible.³

At the beginning of the process of reform, the ‘*ulamā*’, who were traditionally considered as the only pillar legitimating, both politically and religiously, the Sultan’s authority (*khilāfa*), were nonetheless summoned at first to cooperate in favor of this process, by assuming administrative charges due to the lack of well-trained functionaries up to that point. Although this could suggest a bending of ‘*ulamā*’ in front of authority, they were not totally unwilling towards a change in the name of modernity.⁴

Before 1860 the ‘*ulamā*’ represented, together with administrative and military officials (*āghāwāt*), great merchants and the *ashraf*, one of the most emerging social groups enjoying an authoritative as well as considerable

³ In this regard, it may be useful to see N. VON MALTZAHN, *Education in Late-Ottoman Damascus*, Diss., University of Cambridge, 2005.

⁴ See R. MANTRAN, *Histoire de l’Empire ottoman*, Poitiers, 1990, p. 472.

position as *trait d'union* between the Sultan and his subjects, and between the subjects and the institutional sphere. Although the reforms drawn up within the frame of the *Khatt-i sharīf Gülhane* (1839) had had the merit of creating new patterns for social mobility, in general the social structure tended to crystallize again around 1876.⁵ For this reason, many Damascene 'ulamā' preferred to send their children to Istanbul, if they did not go themselves, to ensure them an administrative or even a military career.⁶ A peculiar example of such a case is given by the family of al-Ayyūbī. Although its members used to claim their issue from the *anṣār*, they succeeded in maintaining a remarkable position within the religious establishment of Damascus only up to the first half of the 19th century, with a few exceptions: the Shaykh Tawfiq b. Muḥammad Abū l-Su'ūd al-Ayyūbī (d. 1932) had the chance of maintaining his former privileges, by keeping his office as *mudarris* at the Umayyad Mosque and also assuming that of *mutawallī* (administrator) of one among the most important religious establishments of Damascus at that period, the *khānqā al-Sumaysāṭiyya*.⁷

As a matter of fact, many 'ulamā' did not limit themselves to assume charges such as those of *mudarris* or *muḥaddith*, but they also often assumed those of *mutawallī* or *mutaṣarrif* of the pious foundations (*awqāf*) which they were operating in, aiming at preserving their social role and, at the same time, at guaranteeing their personal influence as well as the hegemony of their families.

Things became harder towards the end of the 19th century. In the course of the Reform, the Ottoman government, which had previously demanded the help of many 'ulamā', tended to relegate them to less strategical offices in a social perspective, such as those of *khaṭīb* (preacher) and *mudarris* inside mosques and *madāris*, barring their way to acquire more consistent economic and social privileges.

Something similar had already occurred in 1831 when, after the Egyptian occupation of the *wilāya* of Syria, all the religious establishment was put under the straight supervision of the central government. Then, as a result of the reforms introduced by Ibrāhīm Bāshā in the *Bilād al-Shām*, such as the secularization of the judicial system and the shift of many

⁵ See J. S. SZYLIOWICZ, *Education and Modernization in the Middle East*, New York, 1973, pp. 154–157.

⁶ See P. S. KHOURY, *Urban Notables and Arab Nationalism*, Cambridge, 1983, p. 34 and n. 60.

⁷ See 'Abd al-Razzāq AL-BAYṬĀR, *Ḥilyat al-bashar fī ta'rikh al-qarn al-thālith 'aṣar* 3 vols., Damascus, 1961, vol. III, p. 1216.

awqāf under a strict governmental control, many ‘*ulamā*’ tended to lose their traditional position in the framework of a local leadership.⁸

The lack of concern that the Ottoman government showed towards the group of the ‘*ulamā*’ and the *madāris*, which were considered obsolete, if not harmful features of tradition in contrast with the aims of the Reform – the secularization of the Empire and the formation of a new ruling class – was just one of the reasons of the institutional and cultural decay that spread in Damascus and, more generally, in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman empire by the end of the 19th century. Besides this, the high level of corruption which many ‘*ulamā*’ complied with in order to keep their status and even to increase their prestige at a social level must be added: the progressive weakness of the central authority entitled them to assume more control over the institutions of which they were responsible, selling *awqāf* to third parties or even transforming them into private properties. One can see this particular aspect in the slight number of *madāris* existing in Damascus at the beginning of the 20th century,⁹ an insignificant number if compared to “the size of the city, the number of its inhabitants and its impressive cultural past”.¹⁰

With regard to the Ottoman government’s attitude towards ‘*ulamā*’, not all of them seem nevertheless to have been imposed the same treatment. Those who were able to become reconciled with the political power, or to maintain their relationship with some local notables, kept exerting a certain influence by filling prestigious charges.

The sources that I have consulted are particularly meaningful in this regard, as they stress out the importance of some Damascene families, whose members were able to acquire or maintain a certain prestige through the relationship that they had established with some peculiar foundations, as in the case of the Shaykh Muḥammad al-Manīnī.

The members of al-Manīnī family claimed their issue from the *banū* Quraysh. They originally came from Ṭarābulus of Syria, then moved to Manīn, a village north-west of Damascus from which they derived their name, and there they settled for a time. Their arrival to Damascus, in the

⁸ See KHOURY, *Urban Notables*, p. 15.

⁹ A document found in the private library of the *qādī* ‘Abd al-Muḥsin al-Uṣṭwānī indicates 43 *madāris* existing in Damascus in 1908. See Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn AL-MUNAJJID, *Wathīqa rasmiyya ‘an madāris Dimashq al-qadīma*, in *Majallat al-majma’ al-‘ilmī al-‘arabī* 48 (1973), Damascus, pp. 309–322.

¹⁰ See Aḥmad Ḥilmī AL-‘ALLĀF, *Dimashq fī maṭla’ al-qarn al-‘ishrīn*, Damascus, 1976, p. 179. See also Nu’mān AL-QASĀṢILĪ, *al-Rawḍa al-ghannā’ fī Dimashq al-fayḥā’*, Beirut, 1982 (2nd edition), pp. 118–119, and ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Bey SĀMĪ, *al-Qawl al-ḥaqq fī Bayrūt wa Dimashq*, Beirut, 1981, pp. 100–102.

first half of the 18th century, may be probably explained with the power of attraction that the city had in terms of religious, political and economic importance.

By the late-Ottoman period, the Shaykh Muḥammad al-Manīnī, one of the most renowned 'ulamā' of Damascus, enjoyed a very particular consideration at a juridical as well as religious level. With regard to the former, in 1887 he assumed the relevant office of Head of the Court of Justice (*maḥkamat al-ḥuqūq al-ʿādiliyya*) of Damascus, office that he maintained for several years, and, with regard to the latter, he also assumed in the same year the charge of *muftī al-ḥanaḥiyya*.¹¹

The Shaykh Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Manīnī was born in Damascus in 1836. After he had learnt the Quran (*ba'da an atamma qirā'at al-Qur'ān bi'l-itqān*), he studied under the tutorship of some famous 'ulamā' of his time, among them the Shaykh 'Abdallāh al-Ḥalabī. He filled the office of the *iftā' al-ḥanaḥiyya* after the Shaykh Maḥmūd Ḥamzah, from 1887 until his death in 1899. The Shaykh 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Bayṭār symptomatically emphasizes his importance: "*laqad raja'a al-asad ilā ghābihi wa jalasa al-imām fī miḥrābihi*" (the lion is back to his den, the Imam sat on his *miḥrāb*).¹²

In consideration of the *madhhab* that the Ottoman government had officially imposed after the conquest of the Arab territories, it was unavoidable that the *iftā' al-ḥanaḥiyya* of Damascus became one of the offices most cherished by the political authority and consequently one of the most prestigious. In Damascus, besides the *iftā'*, there were two other relevant offices, with regard to the religious and social prestige that their *mutawallī* could assume and to the salary by which he could find a benefit for himself and his family: the *khiṭāba* at the Umayyad Mosque and the *niqābat al-ashrāf*. The organization, at a hierarchical level, of the 'ulamā', primarily depended on the control of these key positions. In the late-Ottoman period, there were in Damascus several families of 'ulamā' belonging to the group of the *ashrāf* which, besides a special consideration, also enjoyed a particular social and juridical status.¹³

With regard to the *khiṭāba* at the Umayyad Mosque, many Damascene families alternately filled this office: among them al-Uṣṭwānī, al-Maḥāsini, al-Khaṭīb and al-Manīnī. The Shaykh Muḥammad al-Manīnī assumed

¹¹ See L. SCHATKOWSKI-SCHILCHER, *Families in Politics: Damascene Factions and Estates of the 18th and the 19th Centuries*, Stuttgart, 1985, pp. 186–188.

¹² See AL-BAYṬĀR, *Ḥilyat al-bashar* III, p. 1184.

¹³ See KHOURY, *Urban Notables*, p. 13. See also SCHATKOWSKI-SCHILCHER, *Families in Politics*, p. 124.

the office of the *khiṭāba* after his father, the Shaykh Shihāb Aḥmad, together with the office of *mutawallī* of the *khānqā al-Sumaysāṭiyya*, a teaching post at the *madrasa al-ʿĀdiliyya al-kubrā*, and the most prestigious charge of *muḥaddith Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* under the dome of the Umayyad Mosque. With regard to the office of *mutawallī*, we know that the Shaykh Shihāb Aḥmad al-Manīnī had the possibility to fill this position thanks to his assiduous relations with Damascene notables.¹⁴

It is not by accident that the three above-mentioned *awqāf* are all located in the same area, the central quarter of ʿAmāra, and that they are close to each other. Besides a social hierarchy, another one has to be established at a topographical level. The social prestige of a ʿālim, and therefore the hegemony of his family, also depended on the place where he lived, and the quarter of ʿAmāra was at the end of the Ottoman period still the most influential.¹⁵

Whereas members of the Manīnī family lived in the surroundings of the Umayyad Mosque, the Shaykh Muḥammad al-Manīnī had to lodge in the *madrasa al-ʿĀdiliyya al-kubrā*, according to the conditions which were established in the *waqfiyya* of the school: “*al-mashrūʿa li-suknāhu maʿa al-tadrīs bihā*” (where it is legally established that he who teaches there, there he must lodge).¹⁶ Being entrusted with the teaching of religious and linguistic sciences (*ʿulūm dīniyya wa ʿarabiyya*), the Shaykh Muḥammad al-Manīnī gave a significant contribution to the renewal of the Arab-Islamic culture in Damascus, besides the prestige that he had acquired by assuming the administration of the *madrasa al-ʿĀdiliyya*.

The most important office – with regard to the religious teaching – in late-Ottoman Damascus was that of *muḥaddith Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* under the dome of the Umayyad Mosque (*qubbat al-Nasr*). According to the sources, it was founded by Bahrām Aghā Katkhudhā in 1640, a longevity which proves its importance with regard to Islamic tradition.¹⁷ Since the period of its foundation, it still represented the most prestigious charge that a ʿālim could aspire to. Nevertheless, not any ʿālim was eligible for this position. It was a basic condition that the ʿulamāʾ aspiring to this office were among the most outstanding personalities living in Damascus, who had

¹⁴ See AL-BAYṬĀR, *Hilyat al-bashar* III, pp. 1183–1188.

¹⁵ See ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz AL-AẒMA, *Mirʾāt al-Shām*, London, 1987, p. 47.

¹⁶ See Muḥammad Jamīl AL-SHAṬṬĪ, *Aʿyān Dimashq fī l-qarn al-thālith ʿashar wa niṣf al-qarn al-rābiʿ ʿashar*, Damascus, 1994, p. 373.

¹⁷ See ʿAbd al-Qādir IBN BADRĀN, *Munādamat al-aṭlāl wa musāmarat al-khayyāl*, Damascus, n.d., p. 363.

been acknowledged a peculiar personal merit (*istiḥqāq*) beyond their ability (*kafā’a*). The Shaykh ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Bayṭār counts more than twenty ‘ulamā’ following one another along the sequence of *mudarrisūn*, among which there were representatives of important Damascene families: al-‘Ajlūnī, al-Ghazzī, al-Kuzbarī, al-Maḥāsīnī and al-Manīnī, and it is particularly meaningful that this long chain ends up with a Shaykh of *maghribī* origins, the Shaykh Badr al-Dīn b. Yūsuf al-Ḥasanī al-Baybānī (d. 1912).¹⁸

Like the office of *mutawallī* of the *khānqā al-Sumaysāṭiyya*, the Shaykh Muḥammad al-Manīnī inherited the *wazīfa* (charge) of *muḥaddith* from his father, holding lessons in the mosque every Friday after the prayer, on the three months of Rajab, Sha‘bān and Ramaḍān until his death. For this position, according to the text of an *amr sulṭānī*, he was granted a sound daily remuneration consisting of 75 Ottoman piastres.¹⁹ Not only the simultaneous occupation of the three above-mentioned positions granted a status to the ‘ālim, but also to the members of his family. Moreover, it is particularly meaningful that the Ottoman government decided to award him the *rutbat al-Ḥaramayn al-Sharīfayn*.

If the family of al-Manīnī underwent a decline in the passage from the late 19th to the early 20th century, this was not seemingly due to a lack of concern from the Ottoman government, but to a misuse of the economic as well as social prestige that its members had been accorded.

In an interesting article, the important historian Muḥammad Kurd ‘Alī reports that the Shaykh Muḥammad al-Manīnī squandered the proceeds of three *madāris* which were previously administered by his father: the *madrasa al-‘Umariyya*,²⁰ the *khānqā al-Sumaysāṭiyya* and the *madrasa al-‘Ādiliyya al-kubrā*, and transformed part of the last one into lodgings,²¹ whereas one of his sons, the Shaykh Muḥammad Tawfīq, who had inher-

¹⁸ See AL-BAYṬĀR, *Hilyat al-bashar* I, pp. 150–151. See also Muḥammad Bahjat AL-BAYṬĀR, *Al-mudarrisūn taḥta qubbat al-Naṣr*, in *Majallat al-majma’ al-‘ilmī al-‘arabī* 24 (1949), Damascus, pp. 59–72 and pp. 222–233. With regard to the members of al-Baybānī family living in Damascus in the late-Ottoman period, see D. SICARI, *L’essere maghribī tra marginalità e tamyīz: Il caso degli al-Baybānī a Damasco*, in M. G. SCIORTINO (ed.), *Al-Maghrib al-‘arabī: The system of Relationships within the Arab-Islamic World: Centre and Periphery*, Roma 2013, pp. 139–153.

¹⁹ See *Awāmīr sulṭāniyya*, *sijill* n. 11, *wathīqa* n. 109.

²⁰ See *Awāmīr sulṭāniyya*, *sijill* n. 11, *wathīqa* n. 107.

²¹ See Muḥammad KURD ‘ALĪ, *Al-‘Ādiliyya wa-l-Zāhiriyya*, in *Majallat al-majma’ al-‘ilmī al-‘arabī* 1 (1921), p. 38.

ited the administration of the *madrasa* together with that of the *khānqā al-Sumaysāṭiyya* in 1899, transformed its mosque into a coal storehouse.²²

Although the Shaykh Muḥammad Tawfiq had inherited such prestigious offices from his father, unlike him he did not assume any relevant political charge.²³ Moreover, the text of an *amr sulṭānī* gives us a clear proof of his inability: in 1899, the year of the Shaykh Muḥammad al-Manīnī's death, the office of *muḥaddith al-Bukhārī* which he had inherited from his father, was transferred to his younger brother, the Shaykh Muḥammad Bahjat, on account of his unsuitability for that position.²⁴

Conclusion

The sources which I have focused on are particularly eloquent in revealing the fortune of al-Manīnī family by the end of the 19th century, as well as its breakdown at the beginning of the 20th. They also stress out the peculiar character of representativeness of some of its members, the *shuyūkh* Muḥammad, Muḥammad Bahjat and Muḥammad Tawfiq with regard to the social and cultural framework which they had been operating in. In all these cases, it clearly appears how the relationship between 'ulamā' and power, that can be considered in its different aspects, political, social, religious and cultural, might not be fully understood without a proper analysis of their relationship with the institutional sphere.

²² See IBN BADRĀN, *Munādamat al-aṭlāl*, pp. 125–126. See also *Awāmir sulṭāniyya, sijill* n. 11, *wathīqa* n. 110. In 1919 the *madrasa al-ʿAdiliyya al-kubrā* became the seat of the Arab Scientific Academy of Damascus.

²³ See SCHATKOWSKI-SCHILCHER, *Families in Politics*, pp. 186–188.

²⁴ See *Awāmir sulṭāniyya, sijill* n. 11, *wathāʾiq* nn. 109, 110.